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NASA launches first unmanned rocket since Columbia disaster

• Space shuttle disaster updates, photos, video

Monday, April 28

In the first NASA launch since the space shuttle Columbia disintegrated over Texas on Feb. 1, the agency fired into orbit Monday a satellite designed to measure ultraviolet light from distant galaxies in an effort to better understand their origins.

The air-launch took place atop a Pegasus rocket dropped from a specially designed L-1011 Stargazer aircraft about 100 nautical miles east-northeast of Cape Canaveral.

The modified jumbo jet lumbered skyward from its runway at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station at 7:03 a.m. Monday, carrying the 55-long rocket strapped to its belly. An hour after liftoff, the winged rocket was released at an altitude of 39,000 feet and allowed to free-fall for five seconds before the first stage of the Pegasus solid rocket fired, propelling the spacecraft into orbit.

The heart of the Galaxy Evolution Explorer spacecraft, or GALEX, is a 19.7-inch diameter telescope that will provide a wide-angle view of the ultraviolet light emitted by distant galaxies. By measuring the ultraviolet light, astronomers hope to learn more about galaxies dominated by young, hot, short-lived stars that give off a great deal of energy at that wavelength.

Astronomers believe that by learning more about these young stars, they can map out the history of star and galaxy formation.

The $103.7 million mission is to survey the light given off by a million galaxies over a 28-month period.

The satellite will go through a monthlong inspection before it begins gathering data. After the information has been checked it is to be released publicly to allow scientists worldwide to consider its implications.